

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 9, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500 Dear
President Biden:

Social Security is a solemn commitment that Americans rely on for economic security – both in old age and when tragedy strikes – whether from death of a loved one or disability. To ensure that the needs of beneficiaries are being met and that timely and quality service is provided to all, we urge you to create a “Beneficiary Advocate” position within the Social Security Administration (SSA).

SSA serves nearly 70 million beneficiaries who receive Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits. These beneficiaries have faced unprecedented challenges in accessing services over the past two years of the pandemic, compounded by the Agency’s underfunding. With field offices closed and unable to provide in-person service, and with overloaded telephone lines, GAO and SSA report that millions of calls have gone unanswered¹ and that stacks of mail remain unopened and unprocessed.² In the early days of the office closures, beneficiaries were unable to report changes to their income, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of overpayments that the agency continues to process. Survivors of those lost to COVID have struggled to access the benefits to which they are entitled³, and applications for Social Security Disability Insurance and SSI benefits have dropped by 500,000 despite the pandemic being a mass-disabling event.⁴

Many of these and other beneficiary access issues began before the pandemic. For example, the agency has long struggled to conduct outreach to families caring for disabled children.⁵ But the

¹ <https://oig.ssa.gov/assets/uploads/A-05-20-50999.pdf>

² <https://oig-files.ssa.gov/audits/full/A-08-21-51036InterimReport.pdf>

³ <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/news/story/kids-lost-parents-covid-19-describe-emptiness-feel81448265>

⁴ <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/581522-half-a-million-poor-and-disabled-americans-left-behind-by-socialsecurity>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK332882/>

pandemic has worsened these issues.⁶ Systems for reporting changes to income are frequently not processed promptly and the resulting overpayments and underpayments hit beneficiaries months later, often seeming totally disconnected.

While some of these issues are related to the chronic SSA underfunding, there is more that SSA must do to address these chronic, systemic issues. But the agency lacks a voice to represent beneficiaries, especially in internal considerations for how to respond to problems and solve ongoing issues. The Internal Revenue Service already has such an advocate, the Taxpayer Advocate. In fact, during the pandemic, the Taxpayer Advocate raised access issues for SSA beneficiaries, underscoring this gap in existing programs.⁷ We urge you to create a Taxpayer Advocate-like position at SSA to ensure that beneficiaries have a stronger, dedicated voice in agency operations. Such a position will help our government continue to carry out the solemn commitment Social Security represents to the American people.

Sincerely,



Sherrod Brown
Chair, Senate Finance Subcommittee on
Social Security, Pensions and Family Policy



Ron Wyden
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Chair, Senate Special Committee on Aging

⁶ <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/526829-tens-of-thousands-of-americans-are-not-getting-the-social-securitybenefits>

⁷ <https://www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/news/ntablog-the-value-of-superseding-returns-and-processing-theadditional-500-stimulus-benefit-for-certain-non-filers/>